



THE CHOICE IS OURS

March 6, 2016, The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Luke 15:11-32

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God of steadfast love and mercy, remind us once again that in Jesus Christ everything has become new. Often, things seem as they have always been: old habits die hard, difficult situations linger, our sins stain our lives. We look for your promised newness and desire your new creation each day. Speak to us again, O Holy Spirit, of your promises. Reveal to us the grace filled truth in your Word, and open our hearts to receive it. In the name of the one who creates us anew, Jesus Christ, Amen.

You know, there's something universal about this parable, something that transcends first century Palestine. Everyone has a complicated family life, right? Those of us who have siblings know that conflicts arise; we often compete for our parents' love and attention. Even only children know famous stories about that wayward younger child who acts reckless. Families have conflict; this isn't something unique to Biblical times. So, whomever we identify with in this parable, there's something profoundly relatable about this story.

But in its familiarity, we may miss some of the details of the story. For example, we could easily gloss over the multilayered selfish and destructive choices of the younger son. In our culture, it may not seem all that offensive for a young adult to strike out on their own and make something of themselves. We value individualism and confidence, and at first glance this younger son doesn't seem so reckless after all. But, like all Scripture, when you dig beneath the surface, you find that something deeper is going on with the Prodigal Son. This is a parable in which we'd love to run to the end of the story, let ourselves get wrapped in the loving



embrace of the father's grace. But especially in this season of Lent, I think we ought to spend a little more time with the broken decisions of the Prodigal child. This morning, I invite you to think through the choices this young man makes. Because in them, we're going to find choices that affect him, his family, his community and his faith. Rather than run to the end of the story, today let's spend some time with this Prodigal Son.

The story begins when the younger son says, "Father, give me the share of the property I'm owed." Give me. I'm owed. It all begins with a selfish request. But, despite the greedy request, the father agrees; he divides his property between his two sons. The Greek word used for property is "bios," which is where we get our word "biology." When the father divides up his property, he divides up his bios, his life. We don't live in an agricultural society anymore, but you can't over-emphasize the importance of land in such a world. If you sell something—an acre, an instrument, a herd of cattle—it had better be for a good reason, because that something isn't just an investment in a stock portfolio. "Chances are that nine out of ten of Jesus' listeners [are] farmers, like the family in the parable. Their land was their livelihood. They received it in trust from their ancestors and they held it in trust for their children."¹ To give it away was to give away your life. Thus, when the younger son takes what is his, he is choosing to put his family in mortal jeopardy from that time forward and forevermore.

Moreover, his parents will need their sons to care for them as they age, and their children will need that surrendered land and cattle to rely on when that time comes. In fact, we never hear from a mother in this story, but "if there is a mother upstairs listening from behind her bedroom door, then she gets clobbered by this [son's request]. If the day comes that she's widowed, everything she has goes straight to her sons. Thus, losing one of them is like losing a kidney. In first century Palestine, she needs both [sons] to ensure her survival.

¹ The ideas behind the complicated fracture of the Prodigal's decisions are largely taken from a sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family" found on her website. <http://www.barbarabrowntaylor.com/newsletter374062.htm>.



But the younger son is not thinking about his mother, his father, his family's honor or his village. He is thinking about himself—what he needs, what he wants, who he hopes he may turn out to be.”² The prodigal has looked at his parents and told them, “I’m taking your life; you’re dead to me.”

But it actually goes one level deeper. Not only does the prodigal turn his back on the lives of his family, he turns his back on his heritage. All that stuff that he sells isn't just his or his father's. It's his ancestors' too. It's that into which they poured blood, sweat, and tears so that they might pass it on to him so that he might pass it on to his children and his children's children. We might even be able to assume that it's been in his family since the original twelve tribes settled the Promised Land. Thus, this younger son has cut himself off not just from his land but from that which came with it: his name, his nation and his blessing as a child of Abraham. Episcopal minister and author, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “What he does is so reprehensible that the Talmud describes a ceremony to deal with it—a ceremony to punish a Jewish boy who loses the family inheritance to Gentiles.”³

So there you have it; his choices lead his family to certain ruin. He gets what he wants. But his new, independent, expensive lifestyle doesn't go as planned. The younger son has taken what was his—his family's good name, his parents' welfare, his birthright as a child of Abraham—and he has burned it all in the flames of his own desire. We don't know what he spent it on specifically, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that he has chosen to follow his own desires, and in making those choices has destroyed his family, his faith and his community. His sin makes the father's forgiveness that much more remarkable at the end. But the text makes clear just how selfish this younger son's choices are.

Like the men's Bible study last year, this Lent the Women's Bible study is reading C.S. Lewis' great allegory, *The Great Divorce*. This book is Lewis' imaginative tale about heaven and hell and the transformation one must make in order to journey into heaven. It begins with the depressing description of Grey Town, which for all intents and purposes is Hell. When we first started the book, and

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.



maybe even now, we were all overwhelmed by the choices folks made to remain in hell. After one depressing chapter after another, folks in the Bible study began asking, “Why would anyone want to stay there?” And the answer is because they choose to. Over and over again, individuals make choices to stay in Grey Town or later leave Heaven to return to hell. They discover that transformation in heaven, allowing God’s reality to take over, is harder than first imagined. Over and over again the people in the story choose themselves, their own needs, their own self-interests over the freedom and grace God provides.

Today’s Bible story is no different. Although the prodigal son’s sins are extreme, they are the same as the characters in *The Great Divorce*. The prodigal chooses himself. He chooses to put his family in jeopardy. He chooses to reject his faith and his community. He chooses to take his money, pack his things, and walk out the door. Ultimately, and sometimes even in the face of heaven, the greatest sin is choosing ourselves. In one of the more recent chapters we read in *The Great Divorce*, one of the angels says to a character in the story, “Friend, could you, only for a moment, fix your mind on something not yourself.”⁴

It’s important to dig below the surface of the Bible story today because the prodigal’s choices are devastating. He doesn’t think about anyone but himself. But we may miss that because our own culture, one of individualism, greed and desire, often teaches us our needs are at the top. Our story is the only one we see. Our reality is the only one we let define us. Just like that prodigal, we are ALL in the habit of choosing ourselves, lifting up our own needs before others’. We often act as if our reality is the only one that matters. In a culture of selfies, social media and sound bites, it is all too easy to listen to only our voice and drown out any other reality.

Let’s be honest: our sin is not easy to talk about. It’s not comfortable. It’s not popular. But, I promise you, it will get a lot easier if we start confessing it more often. The Church even sets aside a whole season of the year in which we can do it. It’s called Lent, and it’s where we find ourselves today. This season, as we prepare for Easter, is set aside for us to discuss those ugly parts of ourselves we would

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. HarperOne; Revised ed. edition (April 21, 2015), page 62.



rather hide. And the story of the prodigal opens the door for us to begin the conversation; his sinful choices are just about as bad as they can get. It would be a lot easier to tell only the end of this parable and bask in the father's grace. It would also be all too easy to see the broken decisions of that younger son, and say to ourselves, "I could never do something like that." But then we'd miss the point. Because every day we all have moments in which we put ourselves first. We all have moments where we fail to listen to one another, where we justify our sinful behavior in the face of another's needs. Some of the hardest words for any of us to say are "I'm sorry." Furthermore, it often feels unnatural to speak the words, "I was wrong," "I made a mistake" or even ask proactively: "What can I do to make it right?"

Because THAT is the beauty of the prodigal's tale. The story doesn't end with his dreadful behavior. He actually turns it all around. He speaks the humble and contrite words, not once but twice: "I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am not worthy." And he's right. But in his contrite language, he opens himself to a new reality. "Repentance. Turning back to God. Following God's ways. These are common themes that we wrestle with in Lent."⁵ And they are the keys to receiving the long awaited good news of Easter.

Friends, imagine what it would do for our relationships if we said words like "I'm sorry" more often. Imagine what it could do for our families. Moreover, imagine what it might do for our politics... We can only hope. Repentance is the key to this story of the prodigal. Without his change of direction, the story remains one of broken families, destroyed community and fractured faith. Saying he's sorry is what changes the arc of the story. We can change our own stories with this same choice.

Friends, our choices matter. When we turn towards God, owning our brokenness, the light of Christ pours through us. The choice is there but never forget that grace always precedes it. The beauty of our faith is that God is always ready to receive us

⁵ Taken from a blog from Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, <http://rev-o-lution.org/2016/02/26/worship-resources-for-march-6-2016-fourth-sunday-in-lent/>



when we choose to come home. Lent is a journey, but the destination is always Easter.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.